"What Shalimar Knew": Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon as a Pastoral Novel
Author(s): Ann E. Imbrie
Source: College English, Vol. 55, No. 5 (Sep., 1993), pp. 473-490
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/378584
Accessed: 31-10-2017 16:29 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://about.jstor.org/terms

National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to College English
"WHAT SHALIMAR KNEW":
TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON
AS A PASTORAL NOVEL

Ann E. Imbrie

If there is a lesson in the broad shape of this circulation of cultures, it is surely that we are all already contaminated by each other.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (156)

Midway through their first reading of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon, my students typically conclude that the writer named her third novel in the same way that Macon Dead named his children. By letting his finger drop on a random word in the Bible, the first Macon Dead named a daughter Pilate, and, continuing the tradition, the second Macon Dead called his daughters Magdalene and First Corinthians. The title of the novel, initially, seems just as whimsically derived. Anticipating the discovery of its meaning, of course, contributes to the sustaining of tension in the novel: the title is the first piece of information we have about the book, and one of the last we figure out by the book's end. Students are relieved to hear (but not until page 306) the "song of Solomon" that allows Milkman to understand his own family history:

Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.

(306-307)

Ann E. Imbrie is Professor of English at Vassar College, where she teaches literature, creative writing, and women's studies. She is also a professional writer who lives in New York City. Recently she published Spoken in Darkness (Hyperion, 1993), a nonfiction work that places the murder of a childhood friend in the context of cultural attitudes toward violence against women.
At this point, and for the first time in the novel, we understand the appropriateness of the title, and can piece together more accurately the history the novel has traced. The lyric is literally the “song of Solomon,” Milkman’s ancestor who “flew off and left a body” (307).

The apparent randomness, however, in the biblical naming of Macon Dead’s children plays itself out meaningfully in their identities. Pilate (“pilot”) can fly “without even leaving the ground” (340); Magdalene sells herself into a kind of prostitution and is redeemed by the grace of anger; Hagar is the abandoned wife of a latter day Abraham. So it is with the biblical reference in the novel’s title, which focuses the reader’s attention both within the book and beyond it. The Song of Songs which is Solomon’s is surely the most explicitly sexual book in the biblical canon, a love poem, written in dialogue, which describes the experience of sexual pleasure. Given even this brief description, students can begin to establish the novel’s identity as a series of “love poems written in dialogue.” That description certainly fits Milkman’s experience of genuine and correcting sexual exchange with Sweet, who, like the biblical lover, is “black and comely”:

She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen back. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirts and pants. He gave her fifty dollars. She kissed his mouth. He touched her face. She said please come back. He said I’ll see you tonight. (288–89)

The antiphonal structure of Hagar’s funeral (320–323), with its resounding amen—“And she was loved”—suggests another “love poem written in dialogue.” Similarly, the relationship between Milkman and Guitar, rooted in both deep affection and argument, shares in this same quality. And the novel’s perspectivist point of view defines the relationship between Macon and Ruth as an ironic inversion of the dialogic structure of loving exchange.

In another context, Deborah E. McDowell has suggested that dialogic representation is a particularly useful device for the African-American woman writer because it implicates a broad spectrum of viable possibilities within the community, and thus avoids limited, boundary-defined representation of a “beau ideal” of blackness (60). Such representation, demanded historically in order to provide “good” literary models of African-American life, necessarily sets in motion a series of binary oppositions—good/bad, black/white, male/female—as well as traditional hierarchies that relegate the black woman in particular to the inferior position. Dialogic structures, however, resist definitive judgment and insist upon “the reader’s participation in the creation of meaning in the text” (McDowell 69): they lend weight and validity to a variety of voices, and force readers to revise their interpretations as they read. Morrison’s developing such structures in a novel whose central protagonist is a black male, whose identity is very much “in
process” and shaped by the dialogues in which he participates, makes the novel “roomier,” so to speak, creates places of positive identification for female readers as well. In a similar way, Morrison herself has described as essential to her fictional project the creation of a racially identified “place” or community within which the black woman defines her own space as separate or “different from, say, my brother’s or my father’s or my sons” (Stepto 477).

We might, then, be content to say that the title of the novel points us not only to the “song of Solomon” we finally hear at the end of the book, but also to the themes of sexual and familial love, even as it complicates those themes through a dialogic aesthetic. I suggest, however, that the biblical reference in the novel’s title identifies other issues that define the book’s form, as well as the political implications of that form for the African-American writer. As a reader of the novel, I find the connection between its title and a traditional model of pastoral particularly suggestive, and as a teacher I have found that parallel particularly useful. Accordingly, in this essay I offer an analysis of Song of Solomon as a pastoral novel.

I. MODELS AND CONTEXTS

The biblical Song of Solomon has presented problems of interpretation for nervous commentators uncertain about the placement of such explicitly sexual material within the canon of revealed truth. (The novel can generate similar anxieties: one of my students once objected to our reading it in a Freshman English class because he perceived the novel as “smutty.”) Commentators from Augustine on, even in our own day, have bypassed the literal level of interpretation in favor of various allegorical readings of the book as a celebration of God’s love for Israel or Christ’s love for the Church. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Song of Solomon came under more distinctly literary analysis, as writers sought scriptural sanction for their own literary experiments, which might otherwise have been discredited as forms of secular indulgence (Lewalski 53–67). In the Renaissance, the Song of Solomon provided generic models for both the epithalamion (or marriage song) and the pastoral, traditional literary kinds evoked in Morrison’s novel without (thankfully) our having to take recourse to euphemistic, allegorical readings.

A course introducing students to literature and literary forms might include several texts that develop pastoral archetypes—As You Like It, The Winter’s Tale, the sixth book of The Faerie Queene (for the lucky brave), Milton’s Lycidas or Shelley’s Adonais (either of which qualifies the pastoral form with elegiac features not incompatible with the tone and eventual apotheosis represented in Morrison’s novel). Even some examples of “anti-pastoral” like Flannery O’Connor’s “The Artificial Nigger” could be included. Among these, As You Like It is probably the
purest instance of the form, in which the typical features of pastoral are readily apparent. Throughout this essay, I shall refer to this well-known example to illustrate some of those features: an excursion from a “civilized” world replete with political anxieties and emotional distractions; a restorative sojourn in a “natural” world characterized by an amiable mixture of classes and types; the creation there of a social “democracy” which is at least fragile, if not, as we shall see, specious; the eventual return of the characters to civilization, repaired by their bucolic experience and prepared to live more fully human lives; the conventional motifs of the formal debate, the pastoral pathétique, mistaken identities. Through comparative analysis, the standard method of generic criticism, students will readily recognize in Song of Solomon the archetypal pattern that informs the novel’s structure. Studying the novel’s development of pastoral motifs increases students’ understanding of its mythic features. (The basis of generic criticism in comparison among examples of the type suggests its usefulness in the classroom. Teachers who wish to pursue this approach might consult Dubrow, Empson, Fowler, and, on the American pastoral specifically, Marx.)

In other kinds of courses as well, this generic identification encourages students to analyze more fully issues in the novel’s plot, its characterization, its themes, its uncertain ending. What is more, tracing in Morrison’s novel the use of so traditional a literary form raises important political questions about the relationship of the African-American writer to inherited literary tradition.

II. PASTORAL VALUES IN SONG OF SOLOMON: STRUCTURE, THEME, MOTIF

The appeal of pastoral is the sense of vacation it offers from everyday life, not so much an escape from reality as a little time off so that we can feel renewed, refreshed, better able to confront the business of life with energy and commitment. Business-as-usual, the getting and spending, is tiring; it sometimes separates us from ourselves, from the values of humankindness, from the natural rhythms of life. In pastoral literature, the characters repair to the country, and are repaired there. But the business-as-usual world is, in fact, the real world; we cannot live on vacation all the time, and so the pastoral world implies a delicate structure threatened by the infringement of ordinary pressures at its edges.

Pastoral literature translates both elements in our experience—the need for refreshment and the need to return to ordinary circumstances—into a structural pattern of extrusion or excursion from a city world into a “natural” or primitive country world where citified characters learn certain moral lessons so they can return to the city renewed in moral strength and better equipped to cope with the pressures of everyday life. That is, of course, the basic structure of Song of Solomon. It begins in an unnamed northern city, a world characterized as diseased.
in certain ways: making money takes precedence over love; destructive impulses like violence and revenge seem stronger than kindness or forgiveness; racial prejudice separates people from each other and denies common human bonds. Milkman Dead travels from this world back to Shalimar, Virginia, a simpler, more primitive and "natural" world, where he is educated in a new way, in lessons the city cannot teach him. We see the results of his education when he returns to the city, if not entirely a new person, at least sufficiently changed to understand and accept his human responsibilities.

The details in the initial description of Shalimar which begin Chapter 11 place us immediately in a traditional pastoral world isolated from the "real" world, like Shakespeare's Arden, by a set of values as convincing as a fence:

The women's hands were empty. No pocketbook, no change purse, no wallet, no keys, no small paper bag, no comb, no handkerchief. They carried nothing. Milkman had never in his life seen a woman on the street without a purse slung over her shoulder, pressed under her arm, or dangling from her clenched fingers. These women walked as if they were going somewhere, but they carried nothing in their hands. It was enough to let him know he was really in the backwoods of Virginia. . . . (262)

The very name of the place is redolent with pastoral associations. Like virtually all the names in the novel, this one reflects a curious combination of accident—readers eventually recognize "Shalimar" as an oral corruption of "Solomon"—and design. "Shalimar" is the name given to the luxuriant gardens in India, filled with fountains and aromatic fruit trees, places of quiet pleasure and relaxation outside two of the world's most bustling cities, Delhi and Lahore. The word itself may derive from Sholah Mah (which sounds uncannily like "Solomon"), meaning "flame of the moon," but popular culture, at least, associates the word with exotic sexual pleasure: students may know the name or can deduce its implications from advertisements for the perfume called "Shalimar." In giving this name to the garden spot in Virginia where Milkman finds himself, Morrison evokes its separation from the world of work, its exotic atmosphere for the city boy, its value as a source of sexual knowledge. The implications of the name itself are played out in what actually happens to Milkman in this place.

Deflecting the characterization of the community itself into the details with which she initially describes it, Morrison establishes its identity as a kind of contemporary Eden, free of the encumbrances of modern civilization and the potential for violence implicit in a woman's "clenched fingers." A sense of community based on mutual trust (no keys, no locked doors) typifies the pastoral world. Milkman's appearance in Shalimar, then, represents to its residents a threatening intrusion of city values. The confrontation of city and country in pastoral literature is usually conducted with wit and words, as it is, for example, between Touchstone and Corin in *As You Like It* (3.2.10–85). That Milkman's
meeting with the young men in Solomon's general store is characterized by violence suggests both the greater discrepancy between the two worlds of the novel and the greater distance Milkman, who has so successfully internalized suspicion and racial exclusion, must travel toward his own education. What these young men see in Milkman's actions defines a clear opposition of values:

They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken. And what's more, who had said so in front of them. He hadn't bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, had called them "them," and would certainly despise their days. . . . He was telling them that they weren't men, that they relied on women and children for their food. And that the lint and tobacco in their pants pockets where dollar bills should have been was the measure. . . . They had also seen him lock his car as soon as he got out of it in a place where there couldn't be more than two keys for twenty-five miles around. (269)

Their response to Milkman's assumption of superiority and his implied distrust confirms and extends the definition of pastoral values offered in the first paragraph of the chapter. Pastoral is often considered an inherently—and radically—democratic literary form; representatives of different cultures and social norms mix amiably in the pastoral world, as Native Americans and African-Americans do in Shalimar. In the pastoral world, common human courtesy transcends differences of class and station. The young men in Solomon's store "looked at [Milkman's] skin, and saw it was as black as theirs" (269). Milkman's failure to recognize the common bond of racial oppression—and to see it as the basis of mutual acceptance, even intimacy—amounts to an insult. In order to overcome the effects of his social blunder, Milkman must prove himself one of them in a process that strips him of the urban affectations he brings with him into Shalimar. He must, in a sense, be made safe for racial democracy.

In the bobcat hunt, then, Milkman is reduced to "what he was born with" (280), a phrase suggesting the traditional pastoral debate over the relative influence of nature and nurture. His city skills and city values are at best irrelevant in this episode: "There was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him" (280). The hunt, however, brings into the novel another significant convention of the pastoral mode and provides Milkman with educative experience. In the world of pastoral, a man, reduced to his natural state, lives harmoniously not only with his fellow men (and, presumably, with women) but with his fellow creatures as well. The pastoral pathétique, in fact, often suggests a reversion to an imagined peaceful kingdom where human beings and animals live in mutual amity. Milkman recognizes this kingdom in the communication of hunters with their dogs.

The men and the dogs were talking to each other. In distinctive voices they were saying distinctive, complicated things. . . . It was all language. An extension of the
click people made in their cheeks back home when they wanted a dog to follow them. No, it was not language; it was what was there before language. Before things were written down. Language in a time when men and animals did talk to one another, when a man could sit down with an ape and the two converse; when a tiger and a man could share the same tree, and each understood the other; when men ran with wolves, not from or after them. (281)

Having witnessed this primitive and natural communication in which men “whispered to the trees, whispered to the ground, touched them, as a blind man caresses a page of Braille, pulling meaning through his fingers” (282), Milkman discovers the basis for human sympathy and understanding. He feels “a sudden rush of affection for them all, and out there under the sweet gum tree, within the sound of men tracking a bobcat, he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him” (282). He understands that Guitar’s experience of racial oppression has “maimed” and “scarred” him (282). His “nurture” in a racist culture had obscured to him the demands of sympathy and convinced him of the value of revenge. Milkman understands as well his own responsibility for lives connected to his, and, at that moment when “his self—the cocoon of ‘personality’—gave way” (280), he chooses to act on his responsibility in ways that oppose the choices Guitar has made.

A similar surrender into self-acceptance saves Milkman in the inevitable confrontation with Guitar in the next scene. Feeling the wire close around his neck, “he relaxed and in the instant it took to surrender to the overwhelming melancholy he felt the cords of his neck muscles relax too and there was a piece of a second in which the wire left him room enough to gasp, to take another breath. But it was a living breath this time, not a dying one” (282). By the time the bobcat hunt is over, Milkman has learned the lessons of pastoral—his connection to the natural world, acceptance of self, and commitment to others. These lessons Morrison describes in a passage that makes new sense out of the phrase, “finding one’s roots”:

he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there—on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (284)

Milkman’s limp, an affectation he adopted to emphasize his individual distinction and his separation from others, disappears, and his steady stride reveals not his “personality” but his manhood.

We see other fruits of his pastoral education before he leaves Shalimar—for example, in his new camaraderie with the young men in Solomon’s store and in his exchange with Sweet (284, 289). Then Milkman leaves the pastoral world of Shalimar, retracing his steps to that unnamed city from which he started, where indeed he demonstrates the value of his pastoral experience: he feels new affection
for his father, although little has changed in their relationship; he has lost interest in the gold he had originally set out to find; he accepts responsibility for Hagar’s death.

It is the traditional paradox of pastoral that an experience in an artificial world cut off from the demands of ordinary experience can instruct us in natural truth. A similar paradox informs Song of Solomon. Flight, a dead metaphor suggesting escapism, is brought to new life here to represent an escape from artificial restrictions into a more demanding recognition of one’s human capacity for trust and self-acceptance. Milkman had hoped “to escape what he knew” (120). Precisely through an unexpected escape—a sojourn in a pastoral setting separated from the pressures of the “real” world—Milkman commits himself with new understanding “to the implications of what he had been told” (120). Again, there is here a twist on the pastoral motif of mistaken identity: until Milkman makes that commitment, he lives disguised to himself.

But this novel does not end in the city, as pastoral typically does; rather, Milkman, now accompanied by Pilate, travels to Shalimar a second time. Morrison’s variation on the conventional pastoral structure locates us, finally, in the pastoral world, where we as readers are asked to discover and enact in our own hearts the meaning of Milkman’s pastoral education.

It seems appropriate, of course, that Milkman return to Shalimar, not to escape from the pressures of his own life, but to complete the work he started there, taking full responsibility for his own life and for another’s. Having long ago accepted responsibility for her father’s bones as her inheritance, Pilate carries them home to Shalimar to be buried; but it is Milkman who brings Pilate home. She belongs, finally, in Shalimar, whose ideals she has carried in her heart all her life; “she blended into the population like a stick of butter in a churn” (339). In her death, Pilate flies away, merging with nature in the form of the bird that scoops up the little gold box containing her name. As Pilate dies, the novelist indicates Milkman’s full maturity in having him change roles with her: he teaches her the way, he sings the song of Solomon to her.

But Morrison makes the final trip to Shalimar not so much Milkman’s journey as the readers'. For readers of the novel, the name “pastoral” bears its final witness in the last paragraph of the book:

“You want my life?” Milkman was not shouting now. “You need it? Here.” Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees—he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it. (341)

Our desire to know what happens in this ambiguous ending and our desire to rescue Milkman testify to the emotional investment we have made in the charac-
ter. But if we cannot trust the ambiguity, surrender to the treacherous element, value an achieved quality of life more than the cocoon of personality, it is only because the lessons of the pastoral world—"what Shalimar knew"—have not yet taken root in us. The knowledge to which the narrator refers in the novel's last line is Shalimar's knowledge, most likely the knowledge of the whole community and its history, not the knowledge of its eponymous resident, Solomon. The end of the novel brings us back to that community and the last line recalls its values of trust and acceptance. The novel asks us finally to make an imaginative journey of our own into those values which the pastoral world confirms, to surrender our desire for certainty in order to accept for ourselves what Milkman knew.

In its active engagement of this readerly response, the novel illustrates what Morrison has defined as essential to "Black art": the African-American novel "should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation... to stand up and to weep and to cry and to accede to or change and to modify—to expand on the sermon that is being delivered," in one's own heart and life ("Rootedness" 341). The ending of the novel enforces an expansion of the "sermon" it so movingly delivers: we must come ourselves to the truth Shalimar teaches and surrender to its air.

The basic structure of Song of Solomon, then, follows the archetypal pattern developed in traditional pastoral literature: movement from a city environment to a primitive country setting where the character receives a moral education that better suits him for the demands of life in the world. The novel offers in the characterization of Shalimar itself a world typifying pastoral values: an intimate communication between people and nature; a sense of community based on mutual trust; a democratic mixture of social classes and ethnic identities based on a recognition of human similarity and common oppression; isolation from the "real" world; and a paradoxical sense of timeless reality. Milkman, we remember, gives up his expensive Longines watch to Grace Long.

The fragility of the pastoral world is emphasized both explicitly—in the impingement of anti-pastoral values, in the person of Guitar, that threaten to undo it—and implicitly—in the comparison we inevitably make between Shalimar and Danville, Pennsylvania, a community whose pastoral setting has already been corrupted by the workaday world. When two generations ago violent racism and greed, anti-pastoral values to be sure, destroyed Lincoln's Heaven, it "was the beginning of their own dying" (237). Now, the black residents of Danville are brought to life again only by the information that one of their own has made good in a mercenary (and predominantly white) world, owns a Buick 225, and wants to buy the Erie Lackawanna Railroad (238). Our awareness that what happened to Danville might happen to Shalimar retains our sense of the value of the pastoral world without allowing us to sentimentalize the experience it offers.
III. THE PASTORAL CONFLICT: PILATE, MILKMAN, AND GUITAR

If the pastoral setting maintains a tenuous and fragile place in the world—because the world, oppressive, racist, race-conscious, has the power to undo it—it nonetheless endures in the heart. That pastoral values, despite pressures against them, can so endure is confirmed by the central position of Pilate in the narrative—a character for whom Shakespeare’s pastoral heroine, Rosalind, offers a historical counterpart. She participates throughout the novel in the pastoral norms it defines, carrying those values with her wherever she goes, like the pine needle she always has in her mouth. Like Rosalind’s, Pilate’s androgynous appearance—the navy cap, the men’s boots, her height and physical strength—suggests a fully realized and independent sexuality. Like Rosalind, Pilate educates the central hero into maturity. And both Rosalind and Pilate are confident enough to adopt disguises. For Pilate, it is the demeaning appearance of Aunt Jemima, an artifice that paradoxically expresses the truth of her “deep concern for and about human relationships” (150). Pilate has no navel, like Eve, the First Resident of the first pastoral world. Pilate’s household, with its casual investment in things, provides a happy retreat for the young Milkman from his father’s relentless acquisition. Pilate’s capacity to live in the world without being corrupted by it defines her personal freedom and suggests that she has internalized the pastoral values learned during “those twelve years in Montour County” (150) as surely as Milkman has been defined by values of the city, whether in accord with or in reactive opposition to them.

To recognize Pilate as the central pastoral character, independent of physical place, encourages students to identify and interpret a central conflict in the novel played out in the triangle created by Pilate, Guitar, and Milkman. The protagonist, himself disturbingly uncommitted, stands between two characters, each intensely committed to different definitions of human relatedness, the one to open and general affection, the other to a frightening tit-for-tat justice: the murder of an “innocent” person for the death of any black person killed in racial conflict. The uncommitted character, in other words, stands between the “humanist” in Pilate and the “politician” in Guitar. The full and painful irony of this configuration does not become apparent until the end of the novel.

The relentless conviction of Guitar’s logic denies the reader simple access to the novel’s point of view. Guitar is an able disputant who scores a number of points in this formal debate (155–162), which is itself a common convention of pastoral literature. Just as certainly, however, the pastoral structure of the novel directs our judgments and implicitly undermines Guitar’s argument. Here, for example, the narrator reminds us of Guitar’s earlier argument when, in Chapter 11, Solomon’s men slaughter their bobcat:
"It's the condition our condition is in."
Omar cut around the legs and the neck. Then he pulled the hide off.
"What good is a man's life if he can't even choose what to die for?"
The transparent underskin tore like gossamer under his fingers.
"Everybody wants the life of a black man."
Now Small Boy knelt down and split the flesh from the scrotum to the jaw.
"Fair is one more thing I've given up." (285)

The contrapuntal arrangement of lines—the present moment against the italicized memory of Milkman's earlier argument with his friend—emphasizes the contrast between the religious respect Solomon's men have for their sacrificial victim and the perversion of religious devotion that allows Guitar to ignore the humanity of those he "sacrifices" in the name of evening the score. The significance of the narrative reminder is suggested by the length of the passage: Morrison keeps the counterpoint going for several pages, long enough to approach a technical tour de force.

Ultimately, of course, Guitar's commitment to political justice goes awry: in seeking a death for Hagar's death, presumably, Guitar "sacrifices" the innocent Pilate. Her death thus underscores with poignant irony the opposition between their views of the world. We affirm the pastoral values—and the urgently humanist perspective—Pilate represents, but we come to that affirmation primarily through a sense of loss. The conclusion is as inescapable as it is discomfiting (and unsentimental): racism kills, whether it is expressed directly (in the bombing of a black church, for example), or reflected in and translated through Guitar's narrowed experience. That Pilate does not survive the end of the novel suggests that the African-American writer, speaking in a pervasively racist culture, cannot afford to give full assent to the humanist "we."

IV. PASTORAL POLITICS: VARIATIONS ON THE TRADITION
IN SONG OF SOLOMON

Urging students to see this novel as incorporating but changing a highly traditional form challenges them to serious thought about the literary endeavor for the African-American writer specifically. Such a writer is faced with literary models that have a long and unspoken history of racial difference from herself, of literary assumptions that may impose upon rather than illuminate her own culture. Traditional literary forms, in other words, represent one expression of what Houston A. Baker has called "the master discourse" (147). Writers who adopt these forms wholesale or unthinkingly run the risk of feeling themselves to be slaves.

The "literary enterprise" Morrison defines in her recent study Playing in the Dark is that of the white writer who implicates an Africanist presence in American
culture even when seeming consciously to obliterate it. The questions she raises, however, direct our attention to other issues in her enterprise as well:

What happens to the writerly imagination of a black author who is at some level always conscious of representing one’s own race to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be “universal” or race-free? In other words, how is “literary whiteness” and “literary blackness” made, and what is the consequence of that construction? How do embedded assumptions of racial (not racist) language work in the literary enterprise that hopes and sometimes claims to be “humanistic”? When, in a race-conscious culture, is that lofty goal actually approximated? When not and why? (Playing xii–xiii)

Traditional literary forms, of course, represent one kind of “racial language” invoked in the literary enterprise and embedded with assumptions that may undermine the writerly goal. In general, the pastoral as a form makes “humanistic” claims. At the same time, the writer consciously represents her own race, in all of its uniqueness, “to, or in spite of, a race of readers that understands itself to be ‘universal,’” or even “universally human.” The one project runs the risk of calling the other into question. Immersed in a world that is so carefully drawn and almost exclusively black, the white reader of Song of Solomon may find the characters so fully “human” as to seem “white.” The novel thus engages, quite daringly, “asymmetries of cultural power,” which, as Anthony Appiah argues, “have profound consequences for reading” (69). Given their cultural privilege, white readers may end, curiously enough, by not seeing race in the novel at all.

I am reminded here of my own response to the recent film To Sleep with Anger, which, incidentally, would “teach well” with Song of Solomon. The world of the film is exclusively black: white people are not realized as characters, nor is whiteness reified as a presence in the film. Initially, that world, although warm and inviting, seemed fully and engagingly alien to me. During the course of the film, however, I stopped “seeing race,” probably less because I identified with the characters than because I identified them with me. This process occurred so imperceptibly that I wasn’t aware of it, until the final joke of the film. That joke turns on the only reference the film makes to white people, virtually irrelevant to the fully-imagined world the film creates, but the dominant and dominating presence in the “real” world outside the film. The sudden reminder of that white presence, which in the film takes the form of blindness to black needs, brought me back forcefully—and somewhat guiltily—to seeing fully-realized persons before me along with their racial difference.

Defining the enterprise of Song of Solomon specifically through the agency of pastoral seems to me a daring choice on the African-American writer’s part. For all of its impulses to “democracy” and evaluation of human courtesy and kindness, the pastoral has historically been something of a cheat, the literary equivalent of having one’s cake and eating it too. Despite apparently defining a democratic
mixture of classes and stations as "natural" in a "natural" world, the pastoral nonetheless affirms a less problematic status quo in the larger social world it purports to criticize: the shepherdess who marries the prince turns out to have been royally born herself, and thus a proper match for her high-born partner. In the traditional pastoral world, love is less a democratic leveler than it is a pair of aristocratic spectacles through which one perceives one's own socially-appropriate kind despite the disguise he or she wears.

The African-American writer cannot afford the pastoral fantasy—"Left to their natural devices, people will all get along"—which the (white) American imagination has historically indulged as a way of making real difference invisible or inconsequential. At the same time, the simple primitivism potential in the form—"We would have been better off if we'd never left the country," or, more pointedly, "the south"—is equally dangerous. The pastoral fantasy suggests simple solutions to complex problems, or, worse, obliterates the problems altogether. Similarly, pastoral primitivism may offer false comfort to white and black readers alike: the image of a world without pocketbooks, for all its affirmation of mutual trust and physical freedom, may also suggest a world of poverty and deprivation. White readers in particular may privilege the image of trust lest they be forced to confront the image of poverty—and the implication of their own history in that reality.

Like To Sleep with Anger, Morrison's novel, finally, displaces this easier perception. It does so, in substantial measure, through the ways in which it alters or redefines the pastoral form. No writer, of course, exactly replicates a generic form in all its particulars; generic criticism, at its best, recognizes something like a "family resemblance" among instances of the type. The resemblances point us to the relationship of the text to a tradition and highlight features we might not recognize or interpret fully without that reference; departures from the tradition reveal the individual writer's imaginative understanding of form, and thus bear the stamp of individual perspective. The individual variation takes on perhaps greater significance when the writer represents a minority culture. Henry Louis Gates has aptly described this significance for black writers who "learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other, Western texts. These black texts employ many of the conventions of literary form that comprise the Western tradition. . . . But black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. . . . [These texts] speak in standard Romance or Germanic languages and literary structures, but almost always speak with a distinct and resonant accent" developed in the unique culture of the writer (xxii–xxiii).

In at least these three particulars—the double ending of the novel, its reversal of the traditional proportions of pastoral, and the presentation and implicit
analysis of Pilate's death—Morrison's novel directly violates the conventions of the literary tradition it consistently invokes. In addition, although more generally and less obviously, it "layers into" the novel distinctly African-American forms, a kind of "literary vernacular" that exists in creative opposition to (or in dialogue with) the artifices of pastoral. Both in what it changes and in what it adds to the pastoral archetypes, the novel illuminates a distinctly African-American development of the form.

First, whereas conventional pastoral usually ends with a quiet return to the city world, *Song of Solomon* achieves a kind of "double ending" with its second journey to Shalimar, the consequences of which are both inevitable and unpredictable. The second pastoral venture violates conventional expectations and gives the ending of the novel additional structural and thematic weight. As we have seen, the final paragraph of the book invites readers to take the pastoral lesson into their own lives and hearts, by defining Milkman's literal plunge from Solomon's Leap as the model for the reader's plunge into narrative trust and meaning. In other words, that leap—literally the character's and imaginatively the reader's—makes the black man's experience the normative, universalizing experience of the novel, whose ultimate meaning is dependent on that identification. We cannot separate Milkman from his blackness—his otherness for white readers—any more than we can separate the man from the history that has brought him here, a history that informs and explicates the final action. We cannot distinguish Milkman's leap from Solomon's, or, for that matter, a suicidal (self-killing) leap from a liberating (other-identifying) flight, Milkman's, Solomon's, or our own. According to Deborah McDowell, a similar fluidity of experience between "self" and "other" defines the formal innovation in Morrison's novel *Sula* (68); that novel, however, may foreground the femaleness of the central characters and push their racial identities to the background. Perhaps because the central character of *Song of Solomon* is a man, who by virtue of his gender does not face the twinned enemies of racism and sexism, the racial issues here are foregrounded.

Second, this novel radically alters the traditional proportions of pastoral: typically, pastoral gives structural prominence to the country world by reducing the city simply to points of departure and return. The novel's reversal of traditional proportion may, in fact, give structural prominence to the pastoral setting, even as we feel silence more intensely when it interrupts noise. Nonetheless, locating the bulk of the novel's action in the city allows the writer ample opportunity to expose the urban (and racial) problems against which the pastoral world stands not as a solution, but as a highly particularized and profound alternative.

The city, significantly, has no name. Although it cannot therefore be said to have no identity, its identity is general, ubiquitous, almost primeval, like the racist impulses that define it. Shalimar, however, has a specific location, a name, and a
particular history bound up with that name. The two worlds, urban and pastoral, unnamed and named, are “curiously intimate” and yet “unhingingly separate,” even as Morrison argues the African-American culture is within the dominant white one (*Playing 21*). The first Macon Dead, we are reminded, took his name from the error of a white man who thought the black man’s identity inconsequential. Both the white man’s error and the black man’s name prove matters of great consequence here. We cannot fully measure one without celebrating the other. At the same time, we cannot indulge in a sentimental celebration of the pastoral world, as it is imagined here, because we know it to be so enmeshed with and endangered by the real one.

Finally, Pilate’s death, so fully integrated thematically and structurally bound up with both the double ending and the reversal of proportion in the novel, occurs within the pastoral world, where death, except as a function of nature itself, is not supposed to intrude. We can trace the cause of her death, ultimately and ironically, to Guitar’s response to and re-enactment of racist violence. Pilate, in other words, does not die of natural causes, but of artificial ones, a point that enforces a new interpretation of the conventional relationship between nature and artifice that pastoral typically defines. Pilate, the most “natural” character in the novel, is the least restricted by an oppressive culture, the least affected in life by its artifices of greed and racial prejudice. She lives naturally in a “real” world defined and structured by those very artifices. And yet in the end those artificial impulses take form in Guitar’s misguided bullet and claim Pilate’s life as surely as the disnatured nurture of racial oppression scarred his. From that irony white readers cannot fully extirpate themselves and their history, except through the life-affirming sorrow we feel at Pilate’s death.

The process by which Morrison informs traditional pastoral with racial themes and insistent racial awareness results in something like parody, in the old sense of the word: an appropriation of form for the purpose of critical re-evaluation. More than a half century ago, Zora Neale Hurston defined this kind of relationship to white culture as essential to the black writer’s project: “while [the African-American writer] lives and moves in the midst of a white civilisation, everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use” (28). More recently, Michael Awkward has defined that appropriation as a necessary denigration, a “blackening,” of white literary forms, noting that it is incumbent upon black writers and critics alike to locate the “black expressive cultural precedence for technical experimentation such as Morrison’s” (76). This position is consistent with Morrison’s own aesthetic. In identifying her “rootedness” as a writer in black traditions, she cites two such precedents: the orality of black literary and folk culture, and the affective relationship its literature establishes with an audience, the assurance of “places and spaces [as there are in the black preacher’s sermon] so that the reader can participate” (“Rootedness” 342). We have already seen ways
in which this novel insists upon the reader’s participation in its meaning, through its perspectivist point of view and the construction of its ending. In many other ways as well it evokes African-American cultural traditions.

Again, like *To Sleep with Anger* (which imports black folk customs and superstitions of the country to its urban setting), Morrison’s novel, for all its “literariness,” is filled with the “vernacular” of her people. The opening pages, with their long sentences and insistent rhythms, recall the story-telling habit of oral cultures—indeed, these pages (like many pages in the novel) must be read aloud to achieve their full intended effect. Circe, ancient and ghostlike, appears in the narrative like a magical figure arising from the mists of folklore—and unlike her more literary namesake, who changes men into beasts, begins the process of transforming Milkman from a brute, of sorts, to a full human being. The novel’s repeated encoding of rituals, both social and personal—the bobcat hunt, Hagar’s antiphonal funeral, Pilate’s carrying her ancestor’s bones in a sack, Macon Dead’s ritualistic naming of his children, even Ruth’s nursing a seven-year-old child—be-speaks its deep roots in African-American culture. The song of Solomon itself, with its tale of a slave who flew home to Africa, a song not entirely intelligible yet fully recognizable, Morrison remembers having heard when she was a child at her grandfather’s knee. These are among the features of a distinctly African-American cultural vernacular—the trove of “what Shalimar knew”—with which Morrison leavens the literary structure she inherits and reworks. In so doing, she both translates another’s literary tradition and lays claim to her own.

**V. Conclusion**

The novel, then, navigates some tricky shoals along the implications of its form. It successfully avoids both the political fantasy suggested in pastoral and a simplistic primitivism that would foreclose serious consideration of racial history and identity. It implicates a dominant, white culture in that history—even as the pastoral world the novel depicts is constantly threatened by values alien to it—without either privileging or excluding a white readership from participation in the human truths the novel reveals. It is this novel’s achievement to be both universal and political, humanistic in its impulses and thus not race-bound, but just as certainly not “race-free” (*Playing* 12).

In part, then—perhaps in large part—this achievement registers in the novel’s development of the pastoral form. From the first Macon Dead to Milkman Dead, the history the novel traces is distinctly and uniquely African-American. Yet that history, as it is depicted here, is bound up at every turn with dominant white culture. In her use of an inherited form, Morrison positions herself in a similarly complicated relationship to white literary culture. A novel that so intensely identifies the African-American experience also borrows from a tradition
that has been, at least, almost exclusively “white.” Both the white tradition and the black experience are changed in the process.

The song of Solomon itself suggests an analogy to the predicament—and the triumph—of the novelist speaking to various constituents of a world defined by a “circulation of cultures.” In such a world, we find neither a unified African culture and experience, nor an “American culture without African roots.” In such a world, “we are all already contaminated by each other,” to the extent that we cannot afford “the manufacture of Otherness” (Appiah 155, 156).

Solomon, whose song gives the book its title, was born in Africa and flew back there to end his enslavement in a white world. The song itself is marked by its African words. But those words are not entirely intelligible to Solomon’s descendents, the African-Americans who people the world of the novel. “Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone,” but his children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, the writer among them, remain here. As an African-American writer, Toni Morrison participates in a culture that is alien and frequently vicious. But that same culture, represented by its literary forms, can also furnish the writer with the other’s words she hears vividly and makes irretrievably her own.

WORKS CITED


